

FROM THE WAR ON POVERTY TO AN ECONOMY THAT WORKS FOR ALL

A CASE STUDY FOR THE WOMEN DONORS NETWORK

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Executive Summary

Around the turn of the millennium, advocates focused on bettering the lives of America's poor people came to see that the prevailing frame of discussion was counter-productive. This "anti-poverty" frame spotlighted the hard lives of poor individuals and their compelling personal stories, generating compassion and support for programs to help them. Unfortunately, conservative critics had focused relentlessly on those programs' problems and occasional abuses. Their repetitive calls for "welfare reform" linked poverty, in the public mind, to "the welfare state," and aid recipients to "cheats" whose poor choices, low moral standards and irresponsible behavior created their own poverty. They ignored the key issue – that the root causes of poverty were to be found in the systemic failures of the U.S. economy to provide adequate wages, benefits or safety nets.

Dramatic personal stories tended to reinforce prevailing attitudes, legitimizing a "fix the person" response that emphasized counseling and education of individuals. But this approach blamed the victim and did nothing to change the way that the economy employs millions of Americans who work full-time yet remain below the poverty line. In contrast, academics, foundations, think tanks and other policy experts sought to "fix the system" that was creating so many poor people.

In 2001, the Ford Foundation funded an extensive research and framing effort to reach the public in different ways and to alter their perceptions about the working poor. An initial media analysis found the "fix the person" model to be prevalent: Individual failure was seen as the root of poverty. In focus groups, participants were skeptical about the government's capacity to combat poverty; participants tended to favor a "free market" economy, free of government intervention. Public opinion polls confirmed these findings.

The strongest alternative frame for issues was found to be one that showed poverty as an economic situation linked to the broad values of responsibility and planning for the future by all Americans. Implicit in the finding was the concept that businesses and civic organizations could help find ways that Americans could work together to create and invest in an economy that supports families and strengthens communities. The best frame shifted from a focus on the working poor to a focus on an "economy that works for all" with an emphasis on low-wage work itself. It stressed that the economy is not a force of nature, but the product of past decisions and plans that can, and should, change.

A Web site for anti-poverty activists (www.EconomyThatWorks.org) featured these reports, and disseminated a toolkit

for incorporating the new messages into organizations' communications and policies. The research team made more than two dozen presentations to involved groups, trained spokespeople, held workshops and presented the new frame at journalism conferences. Meanwhile, a stagnant U.S. economy and recurrent corporate scandals provided a ready news hook for journalists seeking to highlight and explain the situation to their audiences.

In 2003, the Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work was launched. The goal was to change public policy to ensure that working Americans have the basics of a decent life — by generating public debate, educating the news media, improving and increasing news coverage, strengthening the capacity of advocacy groups to deliver the new messages, and moving policy objectives at the local, state and national levels. With support from the Ford Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the team assembled a Media Strategies Group to reach out to the “Five As”: advocacy groups, authors, academics, activists and agendasetters, including media representatives and elected officials. The objective was to nurture cooperation and partnership in promoting a new public understanding of low-wage work issues.

While advocacy groups and activists were trained to deliver the new messages through media briefings, op-ed pieces and ballot initiatives, agenda-setters were directed to the Initiative's new Web site (www.lowwagework.org) for fact sheets, contacts, news releases and reviews of books by the collaborating authors. Academic participants held seminars and conferences on poverty and its systemic causes, which were echoed by columnists and pundits. Legislators found themselves pressed for action to raise the minimum wage and mandate family leave.

The results have been gratifying. In-depth media coverage of economic causes of poverty ballooned: the Associated Press coverage of low-wage work actually doubled from 2001 to 2005. The new frame is broadly evident, as illustrated in a Nov. 15, 2003, editorial in *The New York Times* entitled “The Wal-Martization of America,” which made clear that the problems of working Americans have resulted from changes in the U.S. economy, not from any failure of Wal-Mart employees. Policy change is also underway, amid continued press scrutiny, as demonstrated by two recent stories in *The New York Times*: “States Take Lead in Push to Raise Minimum Wages” (Jan. 1, 2006) and “Wal-Mart in Their Sights, States Press for Health Benefits” (Jan. 5, 2006). The role of the economic system in creating low-wage work and policies to change the situation are becoming the focus of the national discussion of what to do about poverty.

Lessons Learned

The lessons of the Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work could be applied to any long-term campaign to reframe the debate on a major social-political issue:

- Engaging the “Five As” is a key step in success for both framing and adoption of the frames. The Five As are: advocacy groups, including grantees; authors, including Shulman; academics, especially at the Russell Sage Foundation; activists engaged politically nationwide; and agenda-setters, including media representatives and elected officials. All have crucial roles to play in achieving the goals.
- Shared values are at the heart of developing alternative frames and messages.
- State-of-the-art research and analysis are critical to understanding the relationship of an issue to larger trends and cultural values, so as to devise the most compelling approaches. Framing is a complex undertaking that must be carefully approached; without these fact-based steps, a frame is nothing more than marketing.
- The best frames are useful only if key groups, spokespeople and policymakers embrace and use the frames, and are involved in the process; there must be ownership of the process.
- Advocates and activists must be flexible and open-minded about evaluating the degree to which an approach is working or not working, if any change is to be made.

- A high-functioning coordinating body (such as the Media Strategies Group) is essential to conduct the meetings and discussions, over a year or so, that will be needed to forge a working and efficient collaboration. Such a body is needed to minimize overlap and conflict and to respond quickly to changing events.
- Many different news hooks must be found for the same message if it is to penetrate and change existing media and public mindsets. Links must be forged to breaking news and social trends in order to generate the desired buzz around the new approach.
- Success requires patience, time, perseverance and a continuous process of reaching out aggressively to the “Five As” to build on momentum generated in the early stages.

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